

# Martin Luther King Day Address 2007

Bellarmino in the Vanguard

Remarks in Observance of Martin Luther King Day

Good morning! And thank you for participating in the observance of Martin Luther King Day at Bellarmine University.

The first sentence in this university's mission statement says that Bellarmine University is concerned with "Educating talented diverse students of many faiths, ages, nations and cultures with respect for each individual's intrinsic value and dignity."

This is a good day for all of us in the Bellarmine campus community to reflect on how our society was, and how it is, with respect to this core value in our mission statement.

It's a good day to reflect not only on the life and work of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., but also on the history of this institution of ours, Bellarmine University, in the context of ethical awareness in general and the struggle for racial equality in particular.

Bellarmino University's historic place in the vanguard of the Civil Rights Movement – including its shared history with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. – is important for all of us to know and to remember.

Our present and our future in this context are important, too.

In the first place, Bellarmine opened its doors to African-American students in 1950 -- the very same year it opened its doors to anyone at all.

The year Bellarmine opened was also the year that state law was amended to make interracial education legal – not legally required, mind you, but legally allowed.

The 1904 Day Law prohibited blacks and whites from being educated together in public or private school at any level.

In 1950, an amendment to that law allowed blacks to attend colleges that offered courses not available at the all-black Kentucky State College for Negroes in Frankfort.

That year, three African-American students were among the 112 students who entered the new Bellarmine College.

Fr. Horrigan, the founding president of Bellarmine, along with the presidents of Nazareth (now Spalding) and Ursuline colleges, announced in *The Courier-Journal* that blacks would be accepted in all their classes. They added:

“The doctrines of the Fatherhood of God and the consequent brotherhood of all men must be given unqualified expression in these days of universal crisis if the values we cherish are to remain a significant factor in the world of affairs. We also wish to affirm our faith in the principle of Christian social philosophy that all human rights derive from man’s spiritual nature and his supernatural destiny as a child of God. When the right to intellectual and spiritual development which is the proper concern of higher education is curtailed by the physical accident of race, there is implicit in such curtailment a materialistic philosophy of life which is intolerable in a Christian and democratic society.”

So please know and remember this: Your University's leadership and its values in this context have been courageous and authentic from the very beginning.

The year those words appeared in the newspaper, Louisville was a thoroughly segregated city.

- Public Parks were segregated.
- Public Transportation was segregated
- Theaters, restaurants, stores, swimming pools – even water fountains -- were segregated.

In fact, a decade later, in 1960, they were STILL segregated – and a proposed city ordinance that year to open public accommodations to all human beings regardless of skin color ... was defeated by the board of alderman ... by a vote of eleven to one!

It was not until 1961 -- when Martin Luther King Jr. arrived in the city, on a day after more than 50 sit-ins were staged at downtown businesses -- that the civil rights movement got fully and powerfully under way in Louisville.

A large advertisement appeared in the Louisville Times then, headed FOR INTEGRATION. The ad called for “the immediate desegregation of public accommodations.” The Bellarmine College Faculty Association and the Bellarmine College Student Government were among the signers and sponsors of that advertisement.

In 1962, Fr. Horrigan told the Louisville Rotary Club, “We can no longer tolerate the exclusion of any American, regardless of the color of his skin, from full and unhampered participation in the economic, political and educational life of our country.”

In 1964, King led a march on the state capital– and Bellarmine faculty and students marched with him.

Also that year, 35 Bellarmine faculty members signed a letter to Kentucky's congressional delegation urging them to support the federal civil rights bill. And three Bellarmine students were with a Bellarmine philosophy professor in Mississippi renovating community centers for blacks and encouraging them to vote.

In 1965 the mayor of Louisville, Bill Cowger, appointed Fr. Horrigan chairman of the Louisville Commission on Human Rights. And Fr. Loftus joined about 50 other Louisvillians for the final two days of the civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery. The Rev. C.T. Vivian, one of the organizers of that march, spoke on our campus.

And in 1966 the Kentucky Civil Rights Act was finally passed.

That was 16 years AFTER three African-American students were among the 112 students who entered the new Bellarmine College in 1950.

And it was 11 years AFTER Bellarmine University hired a black Baptist chemistry professor, Dr. Henry S. Wilson, who was to become the university's first full professor before his retirement in 1967.

Bellarmino's commitment to issues of diversity, of course, has continued, and here are some of the milestones that have marked the years:

In 1969, the Thomas Merton Center was established, with Merton's close friend, John Howard Griffin, author of *Black Like Me*, as speaker. (And speaking of Merton on King Day, it is interesting to note that at the time of King's assassination in 1968, he was planning to make a retreat with Merton at Our Lady of Gethsemani Abbey. Merton's own death came eight months after King's.

Both men wrote and spoke of equality, peace, the dignity of each individual and the interrelatedness of all people and things.)

In 1979, the Bellarmine Medal was presented to the Rev. Jesse Jackson, a former aide to Martin Luther King and the founder of PUSH for excellence.

In 1989, the Student Association for Equality was formed, inheriting the place that Bellarmine's Black Student Union had held from 1969 into the 1980s.

In 1993, the Bellarmine Medal was awarded posthumously to tennis professional Arthur Ashe. His widow, Jeanne Moutoussay Ashe, accepted it on his behalf.

In 1994 UMOJA (now UNITE), a student group that promotes multiculturalism, brought Julian Bond to speak during Black History Month.

We have had the African-American Read-In Chain, started by Dr. Celeste Nichols in 1994, in which we read works by or about minorities. Look for that during Black History Month in a couple of weeks

Last semester students created a new Black Student Union to promote African-American tradition, history and culture on campus.

And we have Students for Social Justice, who are focusing this semester on the tragic crisis in Darfur.

And also, on Feb. 22 at 7 p.m. in Frazier Hall, Dr. Vincent Harding, a friend and associate of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., will deliver a lecture entitled "Thomas Merton and the Tragedy and the Hope of America."

Every year we host the Lincoln Foundation's Whitney M. Young Scholars Program, which brings 150 disadvantaged, predominately African American 7th graders to campus for an intensive week of enrichment activities.

Our commitment to all Whitney M. Young Scholars is that we will cover their full tuition if they want to come here.

We also are a major sponsor of the WHAS Kids Fulfilling the Dream scholarship program, which will go to 10 disadvantaged high school students in Louisville this year.

And we offer three full-tuition Black Achievers scholarships.

Even with all of this activity, let's pause here to just say out loud that our campus is not nearly as diverse as we want it to be, and we are still working on that.

Last year, I announced Vision 2020, which envisions Bellarmine becoming the premier independent Catholic university in the South, and thereby the leading private institution in this state and region.

Enrollment at Bellarmine will triple over the next 15 years -- and significant growth in the diversity of our campus, students, faculty and staff, is a key part of that plan.

Also last year I was very privileged to announce that our Bellarmine alumna and now Trustee, Angela Mason – an African-American woman who was a distinguished member of the Bellarmine class of '80, and who was herself a scholarship student here – had donated \$2 million to Bellarmine to endow the James and Norma Mason Scholarship Fund.

Her gift will provide full tuition for two academically talented students who demonstrate financial need.

That brings us right up to Today.

As we reflect on King's life and work, and on Bellarmine's history, let's also reflect on our own individual attitudes and behaviors toward each other.

Remember the words from Bellarmine's mission statement, about "respect for each individual's intrinsic value and dignity."

Remember the Catholic college presidents' public statement in 1950 about "the proper concern of higher education."

And before the end of the day, log onto a computer and Google, "Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. -- quotations."

Read through a few pages of them.

And then e-mail to me the quotation that grabbed you the most, and tell me why.

That would be interesting and thought provoking for both of us.

Thank you, and have a great and thoughtful day!